

The Truth about Common Core

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April 3, 2013 4:00 A.M.

Exhibit No. 10
Date 4-9-13
Bill No. .

The new Common Core math and reading standards adopted by 45 states have come under a firestorm of criticism from tea-party activists and commentators such as Glenn Beck and Michelle Malkin. Beck calls the standards a stealth “leftist indoctrination” plot by the Obama administration. Malkin warns that they will “eliminate American children’s core knowledge base in English, language arts and history.” As education scholars at two right-of-center think tanks, we feel compelled to set the record straight.

Here’s what the Common Core State Standards do: They simply delineate what children should know at each grade level and describe the skills that they must acquire to stay on course toward college or career readiness. They are not a curriculum; it’s up to school districts to choose curricula that comply with the standards. The Fordham Institute has carefully examined Common Core and compared it with existing state standards: It found that for most states, Common Core is a great improvement with regard to rigor and cohesiveness.

For decades, students in different states have been taught different material at different rates and held to radically different standards. Several years ago, a small group of governors joined together in an effort to align their states’ standards and assessments. This group expanded through the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers. In 2007, curriculum experts began to devise the new Common Core standards. Drafts were circulated among the states, comments received, and the standards adjusted. So far, 45 states and the District of Columbia have signed up to implement these new expectations.

Now let’s address the false claims circulated by the most vocal critics of Common Core.

Common Core is not “ObamaCore,” as some suggest. While President Obama often tries to claim credit, the truth is that the development of Common Core was well underway before he took office in January 2009. Some argue that states were coerced into adopting Common Core by the Obama administration as a requirement for applying for its Race to the Top grant competition (and No Child Left Behind waiver program). But the administration has stated that adoption of “college and career readiness standards” doesn’t necessarily mean adoption of Common Core. At least a handful of states had K–12 content standards that were equally good, and the administration would have been hard-pressed to argue otherwise.

Education policymaking — and 90 percent of funding — is still handled at the state and local levels. And tying strings to federal education dollars is nothing new. No Child Left Behind — George W. Bush’s signature education law — linked federal Title I dollars directly to state education policy, and states not complying risked losing millions in compensatory-education funding (that is, funding for programs for children at risk of dropping out of school).

Perhaps the clearest evidence that states can still set their own standards is the fact that five states have not adopted Common Core. Some that have adopted it might opt out, and they shouldn’t lose a dime if they do.

The most prominent criticism of Common Core is that it abandons classical literature and instead forces students to read dry government manuals. This claim reflects a profound and perhaps deliberate misunderstanding of Common Core literacy standards, which do encourage increased exposure to informational texts and literary nonfiction. The goal is to have children

read challenging texts that will build their vocabulary and background knowledge, a strategy grounded in what education scholar E. D. Hirsch has shown: A broad, content-rich curriculum reduces the achievement gap between the middle class and the poor.

Common Core suggests that, as a student progresses through the grades, the nonfiction proportion of materials should increase until, by the end of high school, it represents 70 percent of *total* reading in *all* classes. The standards explicitly warn that English teachers “are not required to devote 70 percent of reading to informational texts.”

These “informational texts” include foundational documents of American history — the Gettysburg Address, *Common Sense*, and works of thought leaders like Emerson and Thoreau. Given the evidence that most American students cannot identify the decade in which the Civil War occurred, one would think that enhancing student knowledge of our nation’s rich history would be welcome.

But facts be damned when there are standards to undermine! Headlines blare: “Common Core Nonfiction Reading Standards Mark the End of Literature.” Reporters lament that *To Kill a Mockingbird* is being stripped from the “U.S. school curriculum.” Never mind that there *is* no “U.S. school curriculum” from which beloved literary classics are to be dropped — or that *To Kill a Mockingbird* actually appears on the list of “exemplar” texts supported by the standards.

Perhaps the most curious Common Core criticism comes on the math side, with opponents arguing that the standards are squishy, progressive, and lacking in rigorous content. While Common Core math standards do articulate ten math “practices,” mathematical content dominates the K–12 expectations. Unlike many of the replaced state standards, Common Core demands “automaticity” (memorization-based familiarity) with basic math facts, mastery of standard algorithms, and understanding of critical arithmetic. These essential math skills are not only required but given high priority, particularly in the early grades. The math standards focus in depth on fewer topics, and ones that coherently build on one another over time.

The Common Core standards are not a panacea; much depends on the curricula that states and districts select to implement them. Some critics suggest that we are enshrining mediocre standards for eternity. But the Common Core standards are a floor, not a ceiling. Students can still be accelerated and offered supplemental learning, the standards can be improved over time, and states are free to devise something better.

Common Core offers American students the opportunity for a far more rigorous, content-rich, cohesive K–12 education than most of them have had. Conservatives used to be in favor of holding students to high standards and an academic curriculum based on great works of Western civilization and the American republic. Aren’t they still?

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